# Monstrous mothers and a the cult of the Virgin in Rosario Castellanos' *Oficio de tinieblas*

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In the centre of Mexico City, at the intersection of Insurgentes and Paseo de la Reforma, the two main roads that cross the metropolis from north to south and east to west respectively, stands a monument commemorating motherhood. Its position at the very heart of Mexico's sprawling capital emphasises the centrality of the institution within Mexican society. The Mexican woman writer, Rosario Castellanos, refers to this monument in her theoretical work.[1] Although she argues that the monument is symbolic of the way in which mothers are adored and even worshipped in Mexico, she does not mention the inscription on the monument which reads: 'Because their maternity was voluntary'.[2] It seems strange that Castellanos does not mention this inscription because it is the very antithesis of her own theories on motherhood.

The image of the mother is of great importance in all patriarchal societies, which have decreed that a woman's central purpose is her reproductive function. The myths of motherhood, perpetuated throughout the centuries, have led many women to believe that a woman is only truly a woman if she is a mother. In line with this, Castellanos argues: 'a Mexican woman does not consider herself to be a real woman

unless she has proved herself to be fertile and the halo of maternity shines over her. This is also how society as a whole determines whether she is a real woman or not.'[3] Motherhood is therefore a pre-requisite for social acceptance and a non-mothering female is an insult to her gender. Thus, femininity has been defined by essentialists in terms of fertility and many female archetypes, including the Virgin, Venus and Mother Earth remain bound to women's reproductive functions.

In Mexico, it is generally women who accept the responsibilities of motherhood and childcare. Some would argue that the innate maternal instinct lurking within every woman explains this social practice. However, feminist theorists such as Elisabeth Badinter,[4] as well as Castellanos, maintain that it has more to do with the myths of motherhood which patriarchy has constructed. Girls are conditioned from an early age to accept that when they grow up, they will become mothers and women come to believe that only the maternal role will truly fulfil them. Simone de Beauvoir emphasises this. She says: 'From infancy, woman is repeatedly told that she is made for childbearing, and the splendours of maternity are forever being sung to her. The drawbacks of her situation - menstruation, illnesses, and the like - and the boredom of household drudgery are all justified by this marvellous privilege she has of bringing children into the world.'[5] Women who reject the role of mother are said to be prone to depression and despair and varying forms of social discourse perpetuate these myths. When efforts to socialise girls into wanting children are so pervasive, it is perhaps not difficult to understand why women should 'choose' motherhood.

The role of the mother is given a special and dignified position and is glorified in order to convince women to accept the maternal role. Contrary to the myths of

motherhood, Castellanos maintains that women's maternal role has nothing to do with their innate capacity to care and nurture but that it is a result of social pressure which allows for patriarchal appropriation of women's bodies and energy in order to fulfil masculine desire. By imposing motherhood upon women, their possibilities as producers are limited and they are restricted to the domestic sphere. This is vital for the patriarchal agenda.

**El Monumento a la Madre, México D.F.**

Let us return to the statue in Mexico City for a moment. A phallic column bares down over the mother figure who looks down submissively at the child in her arms. Either side of her kneel two male figures. One of these holds a sheaf of corn, which can be interpreted as representing the sphere of production, and the other a book, the cultural sphere. Both of these spheres are held away from the woman in the centre because it is her destiny to be a mother. The male figures may be kneeling down in reverence to her but it would seem that they are merely paying lip service to

the social importance of her role so as to ensure that she accepts her position without question and does not threaten the dominant order by penetrating the male spheres. Castellanos highlights the injustice of this system. The myths mean that motherhood is often not a free choice made by individual women. Her belief that motherhood should become an option and not an obligation for women is made clear in the text we are to consider here.

In this paper, I intend to analyse Castellanos' critique of the institution of motherhood. I shall consider two of the most important mythical figures in the symbolic imaginary of Mexico, la Malinche and the Virgin of Guadalupe, as well as the works of the theorists and social commentators Octavio Paz, Roger Bartra and Sonia Montecino, all of whom use the figure of the monstrous Malinche to explain the cult of the Virgin in Mexico. I shall then analyse the way in which Castellanos deconstructs the saintly image of Mexican mothers and critiques the cult of the Virgin through her representation of mothers as monstrous and strangling in her novel, *Oficio de tinieblas* first published in 1962. I shall conclude by considering the effectiveness of her critique.

**Mythical mothers: la Malinche and the Virgin of Guadalupe**

Two of Mexico's most important mythical figures are mothers. Both originate from the time of the Conquest but, as mothers, they are complete contrasts. These figures are La Malinche and the Virgin of Guadalupe.

La Malinche was born around the year 1500 and was sold by her family into slavery. Later, in 1519, she was given as a present to Hernán Cortés, the leader of the

conquistadors in Mexico. She served him as a translator during the conquest mediating between the Spanish and the native Indians. Hence she is seen as responsible for the quick defeat of the indigenous peoples, the downfall of the entire Aztec Empire and is condemned as a traitor. She was also infamous for supposedly being the first Indian woman to succumb to the sexual advances of the Spanish conquistadors. She bore a child to Cortés and is therefore seen as both the mother of contemporary Mexican identity and the bastard *mestizo* race. This female figure, then, is situated at the very centre of this highly sexualised model of Mexican national identity yet her actions have led her to be branded as the epitome of the bad mother and as the most hated woman in the Americas.

The Virgin of Guadalupe on the other hand incarnates all those values associated with the good Mexican mother. A Virgin with indigenous features, she supposedly first appeared to an Indian man, Juan Diego, in 1531 at Teypeyac, a hill outside Mexico City which was once the shrine of Tonantzin, Aztec goddess of death. Being an indigenous Virgin with whom the conquered Indians could identify, she played a pivotal role in the spiritual conversion of the native Indians to Catholicism. She is a symbol of self-sacrifice and is meek, kind and shelters the needy. Whereas La Malinche is a sexual figure, a depraved and lustful woman, the Virgin of Guadalupe, incarnates the most perfect image of femininity.

The importance of these cultural figures is highlighted by the fact that they are repeatedly discussed by those writers involved in theorising *mexicanidad*, or Mexican identity. The first to focus on the Virgin/La Malinche dichotomy in relation to Mexican identity was Octavio Paz in his *El laberinto de la soledad* written in 1950.

Paz argues that it is solitude that lies at the root of Mexican identity and he associates this solitude with illegitimacy. This links back to La Malinche, a raped woman who engendered the *mestizo* race. He refers to her as *la Chingada*. It is virtually impossible to translate this but, in its literal sense, *la Chingada* means 'the fucked woman'. *Chingar* can be seen to define a large part of Mexican life and the belief that you are either a *chingado* or a *chingón*, that is to say you are the subject or object of this strongest of verbs, persists, as is epitomised by Carlos Fuentes' novel, *La muerte de Artemio Cruz*.[6]

The Mexican nation, then, is seen to be the result of Cortés' violation of la Malinche / *la Chingada*. Paz analyses the cry made on Mexican Independence Day in the Zócalo:[7] '¡Viva México, hijos de la Chingada', long live Mexico and the children of *la Chingada*. Although he argues that this cry is a positive and triumphant one, it also contains quite sinister undertones. As I have suggested, the verb 'chingar' has very negative connotations. It denotes impotence when faced with violence, failure, has sexual implications and is a very strong swear word. Paz says: 'It is a cruel, active, masculine verb: it stings, injures, shatters and stains.'[8] To call a person, particularly a man, a *chingado* is a great insult as it implies that the individual is passive, inert, open to abuse, and female identified, exactly that which the macho Mexican male claims not to be. Paz maintains that Mexican identity is founded on a series of inauthentic masks which protect the Mexican from this openness associated with *la Chingada*. It is a cultural heritage that they would rather forget.

Being a *chingado* is, therefore, something shameful and the result of being 'the children of *la Chingada*' is difficult to bear. Paz uses the hated *Chingada* / Malinche to explain the cult of the Virgin in Mexico. He maintains that the specific nature of Mexican Catholicism revolves around the cult of the Virgin of Guadalupe. This is certainly true, so much so that some claim that Mexicans are 'guadalupanos' rather than 'católicos' or Catholics. She enjoys a fanatical devotion. Paz maintains that she is a symbol of shelter and protection and turning towards her is a 'return to the womb'.[9] He says: 'she is a source of comfort for the poor, a shield for the weak, shelter for the oppressed. In short, she is a mother for the orphans.'[10] Paz argues that this is why she is so important in Mexico. She constitutes the very antithesis of *la Chingada* whom the Mexicans simply cannot forgive and they, the bastard race, the orphans, turn towards their Virgin mother for comfort and solace.

Roger Bartra goes even further in examining the Virgin / La Malinche dichotomy. He too maintains that the cult of the Virgin can only be understood if we also take into consideration the monstrous Malinche. Whereas Paz suggests that it is the inability of the Mexicans to come to terms with being 'the children of la Chingada' that leads them to despise the mythical figure of la Malinche, Bartra emphasises to a greater extent the treachery and disgrace contemporary Mexicans associate with the actual sexual act in which she engaged with Cortés. She has come to epitomise everything that is negative about femininity and the only way for women to redeem themselves as descendants of this monstrous woman is to associate themselves with another more positive mythical mother figure: the Virgin. Bartra says: 'In some ways the treason of the real, living Indian women, women like la Malinche who spread their legs for the conquistadors, is purified by the tears of the

idealised Indian woman: the Virgin of Guadalupe.'[11] The ideal of Mexican motherhood, incarnated by the Virgin, can, in some ways, be seen as a form of cultural purification after the humiliating invasion of the conquistadors.

Contemporary Mexican women continue to be closely associated with la Malinche. They are seen as her direct descendants, are associated with la Malinche's depraved sexuality and can only redeem themselves by suppressing this and by attempting to emulate the positive values of femininity embodied by the Virgin. Bartra argues:

> The Mexican male knows that the women in his life – his mother, his lover, and his wife – have been violated by the conquistadors and, moreover, he suspects that they desired this violation. For this reason, he desires revenge and oppresses her. He demands complete self-sacrifice from her […] She has inherited the ancient feminine treachery as within her dwells the lascivious Malinche. She should emulate the tenderness of a virgin in order to redeem herself for her terrible sin.[12]

The sins of la Malinche are therefore used as a justification for the oppression of women.

A feminist analysis of the la Malinche / Virgin of Guadalupe dichotomy is evident in the works of Sonia Montecino.[13] She argues that the Virgin is central to the construction of femininity in Latin American cultures because she embodies virtues convenient for the patriarchal order such as passivity, tenderness and self-sacrifice. According to patriarchal myths, La Malinche is a sexualised figure, a headstrong

woman, and a subject who freely chose her destiny. Such a woman is dangerous to the patriarchal order so she is presented as hateful and women are forced instead to identify and emulate the Virgin, a less threatening figure. She is guaranteed to be free from the sexuality evident in la Malinche because she is a virgin, and she is self-sacrificing, showing absolute devotion throughout her life to both God and to her son. In many ways the image of the Virgin serves as a means of suppressing the threatening and deviant femininity embodied by la Malinche.

It is not surprising, then, that la Malinche has been referred to as the Mexican Eve. The supposed sins of these women are both tainted with carnal desire and the similarities between the la Malinche / Virgin of Guadalupe dichotomy in Mexican culture and the Eve / Mary dichotomy in Christianity are quite remarkable. Again we see a contrast between real, physical woman, associated with Eve, and idealised femininity presented through the image of the Virgin.

In this respect, many Mexican women suffer from a double burden. As Mexicans, they are seen to embody the deviant femininity of la Malinche. If they belong to the Christian faith, they are also seen as descendants of Eve. Perhaps for this reason, the desire to emulate the Virgin is greater in Mexico than in other cultures. I shall now proceed to discuss the images of motherhood in Castellanos' text, *Oficio de tinieblas*, and examine how she deconstructs the notion of Virgin identified motherhood.

**Destroying the sentimental image of the Virgin in *Oficio de tinieblas***

*Oficio de Tinieblas* is based on a historical event: the 1867 uprising of the Chamula Indians in San Cristóbal in the state of Chiapas in Southern Mexico. The location remains the same but Castellanos re-situates the event in a time with which she was more familiar, the late 1930s and the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas. During his six years in power, he introduced agrarian reform laws that aimed to break down the traditional *hacienda* system and redistribute land to the landless Indians. The new laws brought the white landowners under pressure and Castellanos demonstrates in her text how the laws increased the tension between the landowners and the Indians. Their oppression intensifies and leads to a short-lived but bloody and violent uprising which culminates in the crucifixion of one of the Indians who is declared to be the indigenous Christ. In many ways, Catalina and Marcela, both Indian women and two of the principal characters in the novel, can be seen to be closely associated with the figure of the Virgin. Both women are mothers to Domingo, the child who is crucified at the end of the novel. Marcela is his biological mother and Catalina his adoptive mother. Since Domingo is seen as the indigenous Christ, their connections with the Virgin are established.

Catalina's links with the Virgin are emphasised, firstly through her sterility, a clear link with Mary's virginity, and secondly by her being involved in the cult of Tzajal-hemel.[14] She temporarily becomes the spiritual mother of the Indian people as is emphasised when Felipa, one of the followers, refers to her as 'our dear little mother'.[15] It is also significant that the cult takes place in a cave, a classic symbol of the womb. In this cave a new religion, based on ancient pre-Columbian beliefs, is born. Like the Virgin, Catalina serves as an intermediary between the gods and her

people. Perhaps nowhere is Catalina's association with the Virgin more apparent than when, after the first stone idols are destroyed by the white authorities, Catalina returns to the cave and reconstructs the idols out of clay. The imagery used by Castellanos suggests that Catalina physically gives birth to these images of the gods and the frenzy with which she builds them is compared to the panting of a woman who is about to give birth. That she is believed to have given birth to the gods consolidates the association that Castellanos makes between her and the Virgin.

Despite this association, neither of them embodies the values associated with self-sacrificing Virgin-identified motherhood. In different ways, they are both cruel and monstrous and, even though Catalina claims to desperately want children, she is shown to be devoid of any sense of maternal instinct. Through these characters, Castellanos destroys the saintly image of the Mexican mother and reveals its more sinister side. She de-romanticises the Virgin-identified mother, revealing this figure to be a paradoxical myth that no human is capable of emulating.

Like the Virgin, Marcela plays no part in the conception of her child. Both women are passive receptacles used to contain and nurture a growing embryo fertilised by a force beyond their control. However, whereas the Virgin's conception is virginal and decreed by God's divine will, Marcela's conception is more violent. She is raped by wealthy and influential white landowner, Leonardo Cifuentes. Strong parallels are therefore made with the other mythical Mexican mother, la Malinche, who was, as I have said, raped by Cortés. Although Marcela is no more able to control her body or her pregnancy than the Virgin is, the differences between the two versions are also blatant. Marcela's pregnancy is tainted by sin, disgrace, corruption

and violence. It offers none of the romanticism and idealism of the biblical version and can therefore be seen as a revisionary biblical narrative.

The way in which Marcela learns of her pregnancy embodies this deviation from the Bible. No Angel Gabriel appears to Marcela. Instead Catalina, an Indian woman believed to have shamanic powers, announces her pregnancy. When she makes the announcement, she does so in an abrupt manner devoid of any compassion whatsoever. She simply shouts out: 'You are going to have a child!'[16] This statement, delivered in such a harsh manner with no consideration of Marcela's feelings, contrasts with the comfort that the Angel Gabriel offers Mary when her pregnancy is announced. The news that Catalina delivers shakes Marcela and she feels none of the intense joy that the myths of motherhood claim to accompany the news of a pregnancy.

Likewise Marcela can count on none of the support which the Virgin receives in the Bible. When Joseph, who is betrothed to Mary, discovers that she is with child, he resolves to 'divorce her quietly'[17] so as not to bring shame upon her. However an angel appears to him in a dream and informs him that he should not be afraid to marry Mary as the child she was carrying was conceived of the Holy Spirit. When he awakens, he does as the Angel had commanded. Marcela on the other hand is disgraced. Following the rape, her mother does not notice her daughter's obvious distress. She is angry and, when Marcela is unable to give her the money for the wares she was supposed to sell, she attacks her violently, verbally and physically. All Felipa cares about is the money and she demonstrates no maternal affection towards her daughter. Marcela is completely alone. Her parents later give her away to

Catalina, their only regret being that they will not receive payment for her because she is no longer a virgin. Her life is one characterised by isolation, shame, poverty and misery.

Although the Virgin Mary is at first said to be 'greatly troubled'[18] by the appearance of the angel, she does not experience the same sensations of helplessness and vulnerability that Marcela does. Following the rape, Marcela wanders alone around the strange and alien Ciudad Real. She is both frightened and confused and the picture created has nothing in common with that of the Virgin's virginal conception. After Mary's initial concern, she is overjoyed by the news as her triumphant declaration in what is know as the Magnificat suggests. Marcela does not react to her pregnancy in the same way. She cannot even bring herself to refer to the child within her as a baby but rather calls him 'una cosa' or 'a thing'.[19] Her pregnancy gives rise to feelings of desperation. She experiences: 'A spasm of repulsion […] An uncontrollable desire to eject from her body the gelatinous mass that was gnawing away at her entrails in order to feed itself and to destroy the creature forming inside her which was already oppressing her like the landowners do the Indians.'[20] Here we see how Castellanos weaves Marcela's race and class into her analysis of her oppression as a woman. She feels the parasitic foetus expanding within her, feeding at her expense and exerting its domination over her. She resents its presence and sees her swelling stomach as grotesque. There is no beauty in her pregnancy.

The Virgin can be said to embody passive suffering with regard to her pregnancy and, indeed, throughout her life. On discovering that she is with child, she

accepts her fate without question. Marcela does not embody this same passivity. She resents her predicament and is bitter towards her unborn child. She expresses her desire to rid herself of it and presses down on her abdomen in a desperate attempt to suppress its growth. She also attempts to bring about an abortion. The child serves as a constant reminder of her violation and perhaps for this reason she is able to repeat her own mother's action giving the child away to Catalina almost as soon as he is born.

It is clear, then, that there are many parallels between Marcela, mother of Domingo and Mary, mother of Christ. There are, as I have discussed, numerous differences too. The images of pain and suffering which surround Marcela's pregnancy contradict the innocence and purity of the virgin birth. Castellanos' reworking of the biblical tale takes the beauty out of the Incarnation, which has been used by Christianity to reinforce women's primary role as being a reproductive one.

I shall now go on to discuss the image of motherhood embodied by Catalina. As I have argued, Catalina is also closely associated with the Virgin yet perhaps more than any other character in Castellanos' texts, she is also an incarnation of monstrous motherhood. As mentioned earlier, Catalina is desperate for children, so much so that she is prepared to feign maternal affection towards Marcela in order to manipulate her into giving her the child that would safeguard her marriage and secure her place within the community. Although Catalina comes to Marcela's defence when her mother assaults her following the rape and seems at first to be acting in a charitable manner, taking in the girl to lessen the burden on Marcela's parents who are very

poor, she later admits that she sees the girl as a tool which she uses for her own purposes.

Catalina is jealous of Marcela's pregnancy and asks herself how this stupid and insignificant girl was chosen to harbour that which Catalina so desired. In addition to speaking of Marcela in a derogatory way, she fails to support her surrogate daughter through her traumatic pregnancy. As I have previously mentioned, she announces the pregnancy in a cold and heartless manner and, when Marcela tries to abort the child, she simply tells her: 'You are going to have the child. I don't care whether you like it or not.'[21] Her total lack of concern for Marcela is further emphasised when she forces her to marry her mentally handicapped brother. Marcela becomes responsible for Lorenzo while Catalina herself plots to take control of the child borne by Marcela, hardly what one would expect from a woman who is supposed to be Virgin-identified.

There is no doubt at all that Catalina comes to love Domingo a great deal yet neither is she a good mother to him. She is incredibly possessive of him. According to Mexican tradition, a boy that spends too much time with his mother will become feminine-identified. Catalina's husband, Pedro, begins the process of turning Domingo into a man. In order to do this, he has to be taken away from Catalina and she greatly resents this. Like other possessive mothers, she is reluctant to allow her son to grow up and sees Domingo as an extension of herself rather than as an autonomous human being.

Catalina's life is characterised by solitude and loneliness and losing her son to his father in this way means that she is once again alone. To a certain extent, the cult that Catalina establishes in the cave eases the pain of her sterility and that caused by the loss of her adoptive son. She is suddenly held in high regard by her people and is surrounded by pilgrims in the cave and is therefore no longer alone. However, the success of the cult is short lived and, after the white authorities have suppressed it, she is overcome once again by the same sensations of abandonment and despair. Bitterness erupts within her.

Catalina's anger and frustration culminates in her offering her son as a victim of sacrifice and he is crucified on a wooden cross on Good Friday. The barbarity of this event is heightened by the love that Catalina professes to have felt for her adoptive son throughout his life. Here a huge deviation can be seen from the model of the Virgin-mother in the Bible. As I have said, the Virgin is characterised by suffering and pain, the epitome of this being when she is forced to watch passively as her son is crucified. Here Castellanos presents a grotesque inversion of the Virgin's passive suffering. She is the one who leads him to the cross and abandons him there to his fate. It is Catalina who declares his destiny to the crowd. Her active role in his crucifixion is further emphasised in the narrative structure. Although an omniscient narrator is the principal voice throughout most of the text, Catalina's voice takes over the narration here. It is she who focalises the event and this, together with the literary strategy of indirect free discourse, means that his crucifixion is revealed to the reader through what Catalina herself sees, feels and thinks.

As she looks at Domingo, Catalina does not see her beloved son but rather a stranger, 'the bastard child of a white man from Jobel, the dishonour of a girl of her own indigenous race'.[22] That she sees him now as a stranger indicates that she is devoid of maternal affection. According to the patriarchal myth of maternal instinct, a mother feels an innate desire to protect her child, whatever the cost to herself. Catalina contradicts this myth as she offers her son for sacrifice and stands and watches him being crucified without any sense of remorse even when he looks at her, beseeching her to come to his assistance. She watches his suffering with a sadistic fascination rather than with regret or horror.

Perhaps even more shockingly, Catalina feels disappointed that he accepts his fate so passively and seemingly faints. The narrative reads: 'Has he given up so soon and with so little resistance? His sacrifice would not satisfy the hunger of the gods. His death would not be enough to redeem the tribe!'[23] His immanence makes the sacrifice unworthy in the eyes of the gods so she commands the sexton to pour water over him in order to make him aware of his pain. Here another inversion is seen. In the Bible, during his crucifixion Jesus is given a sponge soaked in water or vinegar to quench his thirst. Here the same substance is used not to soothe his pain but rather to intensify it. Once again, the complete contrast between the Virgin Mary weeping silently at the foot of the cross and this monstrous mother is made evident.

Domingo's crucifixion is gruesome. He is nailed to the cross and rusty nails are said to scratch against his fragile bones and smash through his tendons. Each time the cross moves, Domingo's pain is intensified, his muscles contract grotesquely and he dies groaning in such a way that it is said to be heard throughout the Tzotzil

speaking region. The contrast between Domingo's tiny ten-year-old body and the huge wooden cross heightens the injustice. Domingo finds the soft warmth of Catalina's lap replaced by the rigid vertical cross. Although the crucifixion in the Bible is cruel and barbaric, Domingo's death is even more gruesome. Whereas Jesus was thirty-three years old, Domingo is nothing more than an innocent child.

The narrator emphasises the deviation that occurs from the biblical tale saying, 'He hangs there now inert. There is none of the beauty or serenity of the statues in his death.'[24] Likewise, Catalina does not embody the serene beauty of the weeping Virgin any more than any other woman is able to. As the feminist theologians Miriam Alfie, Maria Teresa Rueda and Estella Serret argue, emulating the Virgin is impossible since she constitutes a perfect paradox being simultaneously a mother and a virgin, both highly valued in patriarchal cultures.[25] Castellanos may have chosen a very extreme example to demonstrate the capacities for violence and cruelty that a mother can possess but through the characters of Marcela and Catalina, she destroys the sentimental image of the Virgin-identified mother revealing this to be a myth which is impossible to recreate.

**Conclusion**

The picture that Rosario Castellanos paints of motherhood is very bleak. The mothers I have analysed are presented as violent, manipulative, cruel, and uncaring. Can this representation of motherhood be seen as subversive, or does it merely serve to devalue woman-centred experiences and perpetuate the women-blaming, women-hating ideology characteristic of patriarchal society?

Some critics will no doubt argue that through her monstrous representation of motherhood, Castellanos does nothing more than reinforce the patriarchal myth of the bad mother, which is just as prevalent in society as that of the good mother. In this sense, she does nothing to alter bad mother / good mother dichotomy that I discussed earlier and she can be seen to perpetuate precisely the negative, maternal feminine image for which patriarchy condemns women. In a sense both Catalina and Marcela are also firmly linked to the Virgin's antithesis, la Malinche. As I have said, Marcela's violation by the white landowner mirrors la Malinche's rape by Cortés and Catalina incarnates the malevolence and capacity for destruction associated with the mythical Malinche's betrayal and the role that she supposedly played in the downfall of the Aztec Empire. Castellanos' representation of motherhood therefore runs the risk of being recuperated by anti-feminists. Catalina is insane, violent and self-destructive and these are precisely the aspects of depraved femininity that are used by patriarchy to justify the oppression of women.

Although these arguments must be taken into consideration, I would argue that Castellanos does more than perpetuate the patriarchal myths surrounding the bad mother. She presents a critique of the patriarchal institution of motherhood and its accompanying myths that impose motherhood upon women and deprive them of the freedom to choose an alternative identity to the prescribed maternal one. It is important to recognise that, in presenting her critique of motherhood, Castellanos is not devaluing women or woman-centred experience. It is not women's biological capacity to give birth that she finds oppressive and undesirable but rather the conditions which accompany motherhood in Mexico, more precisely, the oppressive and misleading myths of motherhood.

In her theoretical work, Castellanos denounces the self-abnegation intrinsically associated with the institution of motherhood in Mexico referring to it as, 'una virtud loca', a mad virtue.[26] This self-abnegation is epitomised through the figure of the Virgin Mary kneeling submissively at her son's feet. Although Catalina's cruelty can, of course, be criticised, she offers a complete contrast to this and, in this respect, breaks the mould established for mothers within the patriarchal order. In being conditioned to emulate the Virgin, Mexican women are imprisoned in passivity, pushed towards the margins and denied full and active participation in society.

In *Oficio de tinieblas*, it is not Castellanos' aim to destabilise the good mother / bad mother dyad, blur the boundaries or create mother characters that are a synthesis of the two extremes. Both Marcela, and more especially Catalina, are Virgin-identified mothers with few, if any, redeeming qualities. Castellanos destroys the saintly image of Mexican motherhood in order to reveal that women are not the natural carers that patriarchal myth presents them as being. The Virgin figures that Castellanos creates are unstable 'double' selves. This enables her to critique the fixed and homogenous patriarchal representation of motherhood revolving around the figure of the self-sacrificing, saintly Virgin.

In some ways, Catalina can be seen to perpetuate her own oppression. She is complicit with the patriarchal notion that a woman is only truly a woman if she is a mother. She perpetuates the primacy of motherhood to the detriment of herself and others. In *Oficio de tinieblas*, being barren negates the possibility of any further

identity which can only be the case when motherhood is central to women's lives. When this is the case, women cannot exist as independent subjects, only as wives and mothers. Castellanos believes that motherhood should be one among other options rather than the only option. Changing this is a crucial part of her feminist agenda.

Some have argued that Rosario Castellanos' feminism is profoundly pessimistic as it offers no real alternatives for women. Often the only options for her female characters who break away from the traditional feminine role are madness and death. Maybe Castellanos takes the first step towards freedom by severely critiquing the prevailing patriarchal order and exposing the negative effects that it can have on women. Like de Beauvoir, Castellanos believes that engaging in productive work outside the home is vital for women's emancipation. The oppressive myths of motherhood restrict women to the private sphere and therefore prevent them from deriving the benefits brought about from engaging in productive work. The women in her texts are not yet **producers**, but she takes the first step towards this by emphasising that they fail in their maternal role, and so neither are they **reproducers** in the biological sense.

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[1] See Rosario Castellanos, 'Mujer y su imagen', in *Mujer que sabe latín* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1997), pp. 9-21 (p. 17).

[2] The Spanish inscription on the Monumento a la Madre reads: 'Porque su maternidad fue voluntaria'.

[3] Rosario Castellanos, 'La abnegación: una virtud loca', *Claudia* (1974), 110, pp. 104-105 (p. 105): 'la mujer mexicana no se considera a sí mismo – ni es considerada por los demás – como una mujer que haya alcanzado su realización si no ha sido fecundo en hijos, si no la ilumina el hálo de la maternidad'.

[4] See Elisabeth Badinter, *The Myth of Motherhood*, trans. by Roger Degaris (London: Souvenir Press, 1981).

[5] Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. by H.M. Parshley (London: Vintage, 1997), pp. 508-509.

[6] See Carlos Fuentes, *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1978).

[7] This ceremony takes place annually on the 15th of September. The Zócalo is the main square in Mexico City.

[8] Octavio Paz, *El laberinto de la soledad*, ed. by Enrico Mario Santí (Madrid: Ediciones Cátedra), p. 214: 'Es un verbo masculino, activo, cruel: pica, hiere, desgarra, mancha.'

[9] Ibid., p. 222: 'vuelta a la entraña materna'.

[10] Ibid. p. 214: 'es el consuelo de los pobres, el escudo de los débiles, el amparo de los oprimidos. En suma es la madre de los húerfanos'.

[11] Roger Bartra, 'A la Chingada', in *La jaula de la melancolía: identidad y metamorfosis del mexicano* (México: Editorial Grijalbo, 1991), pp. 205-224 (p. 219): 'De alguna manera la traición de las indias reales – las Malinches que abrieron su sexo al conquistador – es lavada con las lágrimas de la otra india ideal: la Virgen'.

[12] Ibid., p. 220: 'el hombre mexicano sabe que la mujer – su madre, su amante, su esposa – ha sido violada por el macho conquistador, y sospecha que ha gozado e incluso deseado la violación. Por esta razon ejerce una especie de dominio vengativo sobre su esposa, y le exige un autosacrificio total […] la mujer debe comportarse con la ternura de una virgen para expiar su pecado profundo: en su interior habita La Malinche, henchida de lascivia y heredera de una antigua traición femenina'.

[13] See Sonia Montecino, 'Identidades de género en América Latina: mestizajes, sacrificios, y simultaneidades', *Debate Feminista* (1996), 7/14, pp. 187-200.

[14] Catalina establishes this cult partly to combat the exclusion of the Indians from the Catholic Church. It is based on pre-Columbian beliefs repressed under colonial rule and aims to restore the Indians sense of dignity.

[15] Rosario Castellanos, *Oficio de tinieblas* (México: Editorial Joaquín Mortiz, 1997), p. 27: 'madrecita'.

[16] Ibid., p. 46: '¡Vas a tener un hijo!'

[17] Matthew, 1. 19.

[18] Luke, 1, 29.

[19] Rosario Castellanos, *Oficio de tinieblas*, p. 47.

[20] Ibid., p. 46: 'Un espasmo de asco […] un ansia incontrolable de arrojar la masa gelatinosa que pacientemente roía sus entrañas para alimentarse; un deseo de destruir esa criatura informe que la aplastaba ya con el pie de amo.'

[21] Ibid., p. 47: 'Vas a tener ese hijo. No me importa que quieras o no.'

[22] Ibid., p. 319: 'el bastardo de un caxlán de Jobel; la deshonra de una muchacha de su raza'.

[23] Ibid., p. 322: '¿Se ha rendido tan pronto y tan sin resistencia? Su martirio no saciaría el hambre de los dioses. ¡Su muerte no va a bastar para redimir a la tribu!'

[24] Ibid., p. 323: 'Pende ya, inerte, y no hay en su fin ni la belleza ni la serenidad de las estatuas'.

[25] See Miriam Alfie, María Teresa Rueda and Estella Serret, *Identidad femenina y religión* (México: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, 1994).

[26] See Rosario Castellanos, 'La abnegación: una virtud loca'.